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TO WOMEN

BY
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FOREWORD

If India is to win her freedom through non-violence, women will have to play a major part in the struggle; for, woman is the symbol of non-violence. Suffering and forgiveness is her special badge. The advent of Satyagraha has therefore naturally brought her to the fore in our national struggle. In our womanhood we have a tremendous reservoir of power, but today it lies buried under the incubus of ignorance, superstition and domestic slavery. To free it from that incubus and make it available for the national struggle must therefore be the concern of every worker in the national cause. No wonder Gandhiji has given it the place of honour in the fifteen-fold constructive programme.

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, the author of the brochure, is an indefatigable worker in the woman's cause. The following pages are a fruit of her forced seclusion from active work. She was among the first batch of arrests and imprisonments of the August of 1942. She writes from experience. Her writing reflects, too, the limitations of that experience. Suggestions for reform outlined by her lend themselves to adaptation and expansion. Her object is to arouse interest and focus attention on the problem, not to provide a handbook of detailed and full instructions for the worker.

Mahabaleshwar,
28th May, 1945

PYARELAL

INTRODUCTION

I have, during many years now of humble service to the cause of women, been asked again and again by women of the educated and well-to-do classes as to how best they can serve their less fortunate sisters. Of course this question has always come from townswomen among whom my own lot has been cast and where, for the greater part, I too have tried to serve. In my period of enforced idleness, therefore I have tried in this booklet to place my thoughts and ideas before my co-workers of the All India Women's Conference in the hope that they may derive some benefit therefrom and that others, in particular of the young generation, may be inspired to dedicate their lives to a cause which is as great as it is good and which needs an ever increasing band of selfless and devoted workers.

Simla, 1943

A. K.

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I

FOR TOWN-DWELLERS

If we admit, as I think we must, that we are, as a rule, wholly out of touch with the poor women of our city, we will realize that the primary task before us is to make personal contacts with them. Experience has taught me that if one visits a *mohalla* one is greeted in the first instance with curiosity but, if the visit is repeated with practical service, the latter soon paves the way for friendship. For ignorance and suspicion can only be overcome by understanding service and love. Washing the children, sweeping dirty rooms, procuring medical aid for the sick, such acts cannot but touch the hearts of the hardest. Little by little the response comes in simple but touching ways. The poor are, if anything, generous-hearted and if a small band of workers visits even one *mohalla* daily for any length of time and serves the women and children there, the neighbouring areas proffer invitations too. Once a beginning is made the field of work enlarges by leaps and bounds. It becomes not a question of what one is to do but how one can cope with the demand.

My plea with my town sisters is to give every moment of their spare time to the poor women and bring to them the message of hope and cheer which they so sorely need. The life of educated women in the cities has become so full with their own social engagements that very little, if any, time is left for the service of the needy. Well-to-do women are seen in their hundreds at parties, in cinemas, in clubs, in shops, on the main roads but never or seldom in the haunts of those who constitute the large majority of our sisters and with whose welfare and redemption from ignorance and superstition lies the only hope of our own salvation. This apathy on the part of most of us must go and here too it is those who have the urge to serve who must

break new ground. It is monstrous to think of parties and extravagance on food stuffs, on clothes, on jewellery and on other idle pleasures, when most of our people have not the wherewithal to eat even one full meal a day or provide milk for their children or sufficient clothing or shelter for themselves.

There is no gainsaying the fact that it is the deep poverty of India and deeper ignorance that are mainly responsible for our present distressful state. We cannot banish the former until we have rid ourselves of the root cause of our exploitation and having rid ourselves of it build a structure which shall have moral rather than material values for its foundations. But we can, here and now, help to lighten the darkness that stalks the land and thereby hasten the dawn of a better day. To this task it is the duty of all of us to harness our talents, our energies and our means.

Every town should have a Committee of women dedicated to social service. This Committee should again be divided into small sub-committees each allotted with a special task. Statistics should be prepared in each *mohalla*, of the children, of the sick, of the widows, of the labouring women, of the facilities for clean water, medical aid and education, of such homes or hovels which are not fit for human habitation, of the incomes of the families, of their working hours, etc. Not until we become intimately acquainted with the needs of the women will we be able to help them. Once the contacts are made small gatherings can be held to talk to the women on hygiene, the proper care of children, diet, good neighbourliness, prevention of disease, discipline, the evils of untouchability, child marriage, wasteful expenditure on ceremonial occasions etc. etc. Classes for the removal of illiteracy, spinning, weaving, basket-making, toy-making, and any special handicraft of the town should gradually be arranged. Women must be made aware of what a pitiful condition our country is in and what part they have to play in making her free. They must be made aware of their latent strength. It is my firm conviction that unless and until we develop within ourselves the belief that moral stamina

is able to withstand all the onslaughts of physical might, we shall not be able to divest ourselves of that inferiority complex which millions of years of man's domination has bred in us and nor will be able to help in bringing in a world where might shall no longer be right.

MEDICAL AID

While it is true that in the larger urban areas hospitals do exist for women, my experience in my own province is that the really poor do not get all the attention they need. They cannot afford either the expense of a conveyance to take them to the hospital nor can they afford the other expenses which have to be incurred when they are admitted as in-patients. They are ignorant themselves of the elementary rules of hygiene or prevention of disease. A fair amount of quackery exists to which they often fall victims. Many will not, even if this were available to them, allow themselves to be examined by men doctors. The indigenous midwife, unaware of the laws of hygiene herself, often works havoc and there is a tale of untold woe and misery which need not be if medical aid were really made available, as it should be under any good government, to every individual. Our Committees could, in any case, arrange for the admission into hospital of all such cases as need the immediate attention of doctors. We must organize funds to pay for medicines and nourishment for them while in hospital as well as during their period of convalescence in their homes. Inasmuch as prevention is far better than cure, we must try to instruct the women in our areas in the simple rules of hygiene. Cleanliness is often almost an impossibility for them because of poverty. I have more than once given soap for washing clothes only to find that the soap has been sold in order to provide for the more urgent need of food. Nevertheless, it is the lack of the realization that dirt means disease that is responsible to a large extent for unwashed children, unswept homes, refuse in lanes, a sad imperviousness to smells and insanitary conditions in latrines and drains, allowing children to answer the calls of nature in streets and all the squalor that meets

the eye not only and not always in the lanes and houses of the really poor in all our towns. This ignorance and apathy it is our duty to fight. It is uphill work. It requires time, patience and funds. But if we undertake it with a will we can achieve a good deal.

Most of the larger towns now have Lady Health Visitors. The scope of service which they can render is immense. Maternity and child welfare centres are a *sine qua non* of the health of the mothers and children of a nation. They are of very recent birth in our towns, and far too few in number. One started by me over 20 years ago has been through many vicissitudes. To get financial aid for it from the Municipality in the first instance was a difficulty. To get people to realize that the Lady Health Visitor is not a practising midwife at the beck and call of those who can pay her or who think they can commandeer her services free has been a problem. Finally this centre has for some years been run under the aegis of a voluntary Committee of Health of women with the Civil Surgeon and the Medical Officer of Health as Adviser and Secretary respectively and has made good. The Lady Health Visitor attends for confinement only the poor women of the city; she is responsible for both ante-and post-natal care; she trains midwives who when they get certificates keep her in touch with the pregnant women in their areas; she holds refresher courses for the midwives continually; they are given small boxes with the necessary equipment; all cases of abnormal labour are made over to the Lady Doctor in the Civil Hospital. She has now two centres in the city, and two in the neighbouring villages; midwives are also trained for work in the villages from which they come, children up to the age of three are brought regularly to the centre to be weighed and examined, local funds are collected for medicines such as cod liver oil for both mothers and children as also for milk and fruit juices; clothes and woollen garments and old linen are also donated. The work could be expanded still further if more funds were available as

also trained help, for one Lady Health Visitor for a town with a population of 1,00,000 is not enough. But I am definitely of opinion, from experience, that the Conference or any Committee of women should take over the supervision of Health Centres from Municipalities, the latter, of course, providing the funds for the proper running of the same. No untrained dais should be allowed to work. We should encourage our women to go in for becoming trained midwives and lady health visitors. The same applies to lady doctors and nurses. Nursing is a profession which should appeal more to women than any other but alas! it has, owing to the narrow-mindedness of our society, been shunned by girls of the better classes. It is time we realized the importance and urgent need of this noble profession and encouraged our girls to go in for it. Lessons in first aid, home nursing and invalid cookery should also be arranged for women in our areas. They should be taught what vitamins mean, that hand-ground flour, hand-pounded rice, raw vegetables and greens are necessary items in their dietary. We should try to enforce the free distribution of milk to children and pregnant women by our municipalities. We must insist on medical examination of all school-going children and physical exercises in our schools. There is a wide field for research in medicine which our doctors must take full advantage of and make their contribution.

EDUCATION

There is no doubt that the education so far imparted has been neither adequate nor on right lines. The buildings for municipal schools for girls are often if not invariably wholly unsuited. The area is cramped, there is insufficient light and air and no playgrounds. The standard of efficiency of the teacher is pitifully low. Parents have not realized that girls should be educated just as well as boys and there is apathy on their part towards sending girls to school even if one exists in their neighbourhood. Too often, for the sake of domestic work or marriage, girls are withdrawn from school when they have barely become literate with the result that they lapse back into illiteracy.

Now that Basic Education holds the field we should try to persuade our municipalities to adopt this method of imparting instruction to children from the ages of 6 or 7 to 14 in at least one girls' school in their area to begin with. There should be no delay in beginning. The Hindustani Talimi Sangh should be approached through Shrimati Asha Devi to furnish us with the necessary information. If possible, the Conference should undertake the supervision of one girls' school where the children are to be instructed through a craft, the municipality providing the necessary equipment for the start of the school as also the pay of the trained teacher. If after, say three years' practical experience, the girls in a Basic School prove themselves to be better, mentally, morally and physically, than the children in the other schools, a definite case will have been made out for universal Basic Education.

The lack of nursery schools in our land is a terrible tragedy. Owing to the ignorance and poverty of our women our little ones have literally no proper upbringing. Until such time as the State provides such institutions, it is up to organizations like ours to try to get hold, at any rate, of some of these children and give them the care and attention they need. In all these endeavours, however, we are handicapped by the lack of trained women teachers and voluntary workers. I have often wished that our girls, once they have finished their school or college course, should give at least three years of service in voluntary work of whatever nature appeals to them, before they marry. I know that teaching is a vocation and everyone cannot make an ideal teacher. But the need today is so immense and the means of implementing it so inadequate that I do think voluntary workers can render invaluable service. I do also believe that even after marriage, if we were to husband our leisure judiciously, we could give far more of ourselves than we do today to social service. Indeed to husband their leisure is one of the things we also have to teach those whom we wish to serve.

Adult education offers a wide field. Here again much can be done by voluntary endeavour. The abolition of

illiteracy is an imperative need but to make persons literate is only one item in the programme of adult education. I have found women, after 25 or 30 years of age, as a rule quite apathetic to becoming literate. Even if they do become literate they lapse back into illiteracy very soon, partly owing to lack of time to spare from their innumerable household duties and also because of lack of suitable literature for them. The provision of suitable literature is a real need which some of our literary minded sisters might well turn their attention to fulfilling. I am of opinion that we should try our level best to liquidate illiteracy particularly among women under 30 years of age. In my classes I found that reading aloud to the women gave a definite impetus to them to learn how to read themselves. It also gave one opportunities of imparting all kinds of useful knowledge to them, of giving them ethical instruction, teaching them the principles of citizenship, love of country as well as giving them some idea of their present fallen state and how they must better their own lot. It seems to me that this type of all round knowledge is really far more essential for our women than mere literacy and each one of us can impart this provided we are willing to give the time and provided we have won the confidence of the women in the area concerned.

HANDICRAFTS

The development of these is one certain way to bring some economic relief to women. Spinning, weaving, toy-making, basket-making, needlework, both plain and embroidery, are among some of the main crafts that should be taught. Having taught the women to produce cloth and other articles, it should be our duty to try to dispose of them. The yarn spun and the cloth woven can be absorbed by the dwellers in the area concerned. It is a thousand pities that we women have not taken a more living interest in the All India Spinners' Association, an organization primarily catering to the economic relief of women. Even if we have not believed in the efficacy of the spinning wheel as a symbol of non-violence and of the moral

regeneration of our land, we might have welcomed it as a source of economic betterment of our poor village sisters. But the lure of machine-made cloth and even foreign finery have proved too much for most of us. I have for many years wished the Lady Irwin College, Delhi, to have a handicraft section where we might train girls capable of teaching these to women in need of earning for themselves or supplementing their meagre incomes. Industrial schools for women where they can learn handicrafts are a necessity for every town. While talking of education, I should like to appeal to parents to bring their daughters up to some profession just as well as their sons. Girls must be given every opportunity to rise to their full stature in whatever sphere of activity they may choose. Even if ours is a land of universal marriage we want our girls to have the necessary knowledge wherewith they can earn their own livelihood and whereby they may better serve society.

HARIJANS

The service of these unfortunate members of our society is a cause that should appeal specially to us. Our sympathies should naturally go out to those who have been oppressed simply by reason of their caste just as we have been by reason of our sex. It is a crying shame that these people who cater for our wellbeing and without whose services we should not be able to exist, are relegated in most towns to live in the most abominable dwellings—if, indeed, we can call their hovels by this name! How very few of us, however, even care to know where and how they live! They are often better off financially than many other poor citizens of our towns but the dirt and squalor in which they live and the ignorance in which they are steeped deserve our immediate attention. The Harijan Sevak Sangh is, in my opinion, the most philanthropic organization in our country today but it too needs workers, especially women workers. I would like to recommend us women to do “dharna” before our municipalities, until such time as they have built decent quarters for the Harijans who serve the town. And, in any case, we can try to get hold of their children, see

that they are washed and cleanly clothed and educated. Their proper education is a certain way of making them get rid of that psychology of inferiority from which they, as a class, suffer. I would like to see Harijan girls trained by the score as nurses and midwives and where possible as doctors and teachers. Prejudice against them, as a class, will then *ipso facto* disappear.

LABOUR

In labouring areas too there is ample scope for us. In the large industrial towns, labour laws have forced the employee to give a certain amount of living, medical and educational facilities for our women and children but we have a long way to go yet. In our non-industrial towns too there is plenty of unregistered woman labour which needs our protection. Even if the output of work is the same, the woman gets paid less. She is often the sport of the men with whom she comes in contact during her hours of work. Their living quarters are often as bad as those of the Harijans and their children are often neglected.

THE SIMPLE LIFE

Inasmuch as example is far better than precept, we must bring about certain changes in our own life before we can ask others to do likewise. There is a terrible amount of wasteful expenditure among our people on the occasions of marriage, birth, death and other ceremonial functions. Whenever I have approached men in this matter the reply has invariably been that it is the women who will not listen to them, however much they would like to curtail expenditure. It is a known fact that many poor families remain indebted for years or even generations because of foolish extravagance on ceremonies and there is also the menace of the dowry system. This must be eliminated. It is a scandalous and degrading custom. We have to set a good example in this domain ourselves. We too have erred grievously in the matter of maintaining a standard of life which many of us cannot really afford. Simplicity in dress, in diet and in life generally will redound to our benefit all round and help us better to influence those whom we wish to serve.

CHILD MARRIAGE, POLYGAMY, PARDAH

It is a well-known fact that in spite of the Sarda Act child marriage continues. There is no remedy for it except education and more education for the people. Laws help to check an evil up to a point but it is the realization of the evil on the part of every member of society that contributes most towards its abolition. More vigilance on our part and a stricter penalty for the parents will help to some extent.

The same applies to polygamy. Not until woman herself realizes that polygamy is degrading to her status will she be able to make man realize that it is wrong. For the poor man it is sometimes an economic necessity. It is cheaper to have three wives than to have one and pay for two women to work in his fields. Here again if women are educated and self-reliant they will not allow themselves to be exploited. Then too there is the tyranny of custom which makes man, often enough at the instigation of the first wife and nearly always with her consent, take unto himself a second mate for the purpose of begetting a son and heir. Nothing but education can make us refuse to bow to custom and usage which deal harshly with any member of our society. And this ignorance does not by any means apply to women only. Our men need to be educated just as much if not more. The worst opponents of social reform are men who are steeped in ignorance, who have never felt where the shoe pinches and who glibly talk of religion and tradition being in jeopardy whenever any attempt is made to get rid of their domination over women. And what am I to say of some of our educated women who sometimes go in for contracting second marriages or to educated mothers who for material benefit give their daughters to men who are already married? I can only appeal to their better sense and ask them not to go in for hurting a fellow woman. Such acts detract from the dignity of womanhood and lower her moral stature.

Pardah has vanished up to a point and will go absolutely in time. But it is still fairly strict in certain parts and among certain sections. It is inconceivable that any

sensible man or woman can still cling, with religious fervour, to a custom which denies to woman all that man himself would not for one moment forego and which has a detrimental effect on her physical, moral and intellectual well-being. It can only be by a full and free contribution on her part to society that woman will be able to set standards of behaviour in all walks of life which shall uplift mankind. If I believed in dictatorship one of the first ugly customs that should be abolished straightaway would be pardah. Men should pause to think before they advocate its continuance while every woman under its sway should rebel against it.

A UNIVERSAL CODE

I have long since been of opinion that we Indian women should frame a new code of laws relating to marriage, inheritance, guardianship, divorce, etc. This code should be optional in the first instance and any one, of whatever religion, should be at liberty to be governed by it. If it worked fairly for both men and women, I am sure that as education spread, it would become increasingly popular and would in time supersede all other codes. It would save the trouble of reforming laws which have become complex and even the mildest changes in which seem, at the moment, to arouse an almost fanatical opposition. "Religion in danger" is a very potent caveat which scares even seemingly intelligent persons in the same way as the proverbial ghost does children !

SWADESHI

This is a sphere in which women can and have played an enormous part. To love one's country, to be proud of and cling to its traditions, to glory in art and beauty in all its many forms, to treasure what is produced in one's village or home, town or province comes natural to women. There should be no difficulty then in our taking a vow not to use anything foreign if we can get Indian made goods. Hand-made articles have always been valued at a greater price than machine-made. This obtains in all countries. I have mentioned khadi before. I would appeal again for

the realization of its intrinsic merit. With the new orientation that Gandhiji is now giving to khadi produce, it really rests with townswomen whether they will help to maintain its output so that homespun may still be available to them. Spinning an hour daily—if the ethics of khadi have been at all understood—should afford a pleasant and uplifting pastime for us. If we could realize that with every thread we draw we are helping to mend the broken warp and woof of the fabric of our national life, we would love the wheel and its music would refresh our souls. In any event home industries should receive our full patronage, if for no other reason than that they bring economic relief to women. Then again we must think out for ourselves whether we are anxious to see our country go the way of all heavily industrialized countries or whether we are anxious to save her from the disaster that has overtaken the lands of the Western hemisphere. If we believe that the machine is made for man and its use shall be limited in so far as it helps to lighten man's load and in no case shall it reduce man himself to automaton as happens in large scale machinery, then we shall have no difficulty in doing our best to promote home industries.*

MOTHER TONGUE

It has been one of the many tragedies of foreign rule that the medium of instruction in our educational institutions has, except in its initial stages, been English. The result has been a sad lack of real knowledge of our own languages for many of us who have gone in for higher education. Needless to say we cannot reach the large mass of our people through English and nor can we produce suitable literature for our women, either original or by translation if we have not more than a working knowledge of our own languages. Then too there is the vexed question of a lingua franca for India. Owing to the unfortunate rift that exists today between the two main communities

* Since writing the above I have read with great joy Shriman Narayan Agarwal's "*The Gandhian Plan*". I recommend its careful study to my co-workers.

of India there has grown up a bitter controversy regarding Hindustani. In any event we should all set to and learn both Hindi and Urdu in both the Devanagari and Persian scripts. I believe it is persons well versed in both that will eventually contribute without prejudice to the enrichment and proper development of our common language. After all it is not the masses who wrangle about these and many other things. Our main object is to reach them and to contribute to the growth of everything that augurs well for them and through service of them for national unity. It is tragic to walk along the street of any town and hear Indians talking to each other in poor English rather than in the mother tongue or to ask for something in a hotel or restaurant and be replied to by the waiter in English! It is part and parcel of the insistence by the Englishman on the higher standard of his language, dress, habits etc. that has gained an insidious hold on the Indian and made him lose not only his self-respect but taken from him all sense of national pride. And while thinking aloud on the subject I should also like to express my sorrow at the lack of pride in our men in their national dress. I know Indian men resent strongly the adoption by us women of European dress even when this is mainly for sport. But why do they go in for it themselves? It is just as tragic to see young men in Government offices dressed in ill fitting European clothes as it is to hear them talking broken English. We women should try our best to influence them in the right direction. Among the many vital contributions to national life that Gandhiji has made is the restoration of pride in all that is worth while in our ancient culture and the desire to return to our national dress and languages has taken root. It needs encouragement on the part of all of us so that we may grow to our full stature. There are many qualities in English people—such as discipline, punctuality, hygiene, co-operation, sinking of personal difference in the face of national need, a passionate love of and pride in their country, their art, their language, their literature, that we might well emulate. But blind imitation of what is unnecessary to our way of life or what is even

harmful to us must be shunned if we are to evolve a new India whose moral and cultural values shall lie deep in our own soil.

DRINK, SMOKING AND GAMBLING

Alcoholic excess brings almost more suffering on woman than on the victim of drink. Among the labouring classes, among castes such as the washerman and Harijans, in the great Sikh community, alcohol has worked and is working havoc. In labouring areas we can help to wean the victims by opening canteens of non-alcoholic beverages as also by trying to tide them over the drink hour, so to speak, by providing healthful pastimes for them. Women's organizations are working along these lines. More must be done. I have been successful in the case of more than one washerman by providing strong tea for him. It is heartening to learn that the Sikh leaders have quite recently spoken strongly against the drink habit in their community. Let us hope that this effort at reform on their part will spread to the Sikh villages too. Educative propaganda on the destructive effect of alcohol on the moral and physical wellbeing of all who indulge in it should be an important arm of our work of reform. Smoking too is having its deleterious effect. How often do I remonstrate in Simla with rickshaw pullers, weight carriers and even small boys to give up smoking! I am told that with the rise in wages of the working man he has more to spend on such luxuries as drink, gambling and smokes. Cigarettes have penetrated even to our villages and have displaced the *hookah* which was, at any rate, less harmful to the smoker. The evil of gambling too is on the increase. We have to set a good example by eschewing these vices ourselves. In the matter of drink, as in many other things, we of the well-to-do classes have followed European custom and it is sad to see many of our young men, in particular, officers in the armed forces today, over-indulging themselves. It is up to us to have the moral courage to refuse to conform to such rules of Western society as are alien to or harmful to ourselves. I know it is a hard task for the wives of officers to stand

out against offering alcoholic drinks to their guests. But it is their duty to do so. Co-operative effort in such matters is of great assistance. I know of more than one young officer who has refused to drink and has not lost in popularity but has gained the respect of his brother officers. If one can do it, then all can.

PROSTITUTION

In spite of recent legislation this evil persists and war has, as it invariably does, given it an impetus. Here again it is a question of lack of moral stamina. We might cope with the economic side of the picture by trying to provide other means of livelihood for these unfortunate sisters but not until they are converts to our way of thinking will we be able to begin to eradicate the evil. So far it has been thought beneath our dignity or unwise to be seen talking to such women. Any woman seen with a prostitute is herself branded as one. This barrier we alone can and must break. I am sure we could wean many from their way of life if we could assure them of a welcome in society and, in any event, we could win them over from dedicating their daughters to the same profession. I am proud of three such girls so saved by personal contact and happily married. Why not thousands more? Too long has there been one moral code for men and one for women. The men are just as guilty but they are not shunned by society. Just as we need thousands of Florence Nightingales, so do we need thousands of Josephine Butlers to espouse the cause of these hapless members of society.

COMMUNAL UNITY

The lack of this is eating as a canker into the vitals of our national life. Those who propagate hate and mistrust between man and man are doing a tremendous disservice to humanity itself. No religion but preaches love for fellowman. It is only man's abuse of religion that has led to the present woeful state not only of our country but of the entire world. We may not shut our eyes to the fact that the poison is spreading among our ranks too. If we could have the realization

within us of the high calling of womanhood, our finer instincts would rebel against such dissensions and such perversion of religion as stress what is *au fond* immaterial and bring into jeopardy what is definitely vital to the spiritual and moral development of life. Arguments are of no avail under existing conditions. Indeed I often feel that the less said in the Press and on public platforms the better it would be. But there are so many common avenues in social service that can and should be explored. I believe it is in the practical fulfilment by common endeavour of all we as women want for ourselves and for our children that an unbreakable bond will eventually be established which will transcend all barriers of caste and creed in our homeland and in the wider world of race also.

II

FOR VILLAGE WORKERS

This is a sphere where our organizations have not penetrated. And yet India is a land of villages. If she is to live it must be through the resuscitation of village life in all its phases, moral, cultural and economic. Many years ago I suggested that if our Conference Branches could adopt even one village each, they would be making a vital contribution to nation building. I make the appeal again. But I feel that very few of us, perhaps, of the towns and of the older generation will be able actually to adjust ourselves to village life and not until we go and live in the villages will we be able to render any real service. Conference Branches can, all the same, do a good deal by frequently visiting the village they adopt and by keeping a paid worker or workers there to carry out work on lines approved and laid down by our Committee. The appeal to dedicate their lives to service of the villages must be made to the young generation. There are, no doubt, risks involved for women who undertake such work. I feel that young married couples would be most suited to the task provided they were willing to become one with the villagers. But even if there

are risks, they must be taken. 'Nothing venture, nothing have' is never more true than today. Our villages are not attractive. The humanity that inhabits them is, apart from its poverty, sunk in the deepest ignorance. They know nothing, they have almost lost the instinct to appreciate anything, they eke out a mere existence. Virgin soil should yield results more quickly than any other and it may be, that if we have the faith, the will and the energy and enough workers, we could, sooner than we imagine at any rate educate the villager and wipe out the dirt and squalor that reign in village lanes and village homes and bring down the incidence of disease. But it is an uphill task and needs real missionary zeal and spirit. The work, however, must be undertaken whatever the hardships and difficulties involved. Here again, apart from teaching the simple laws of personal and social hygiene to the women and children, apart from making them literate and imparting general knowledge to them, apart from a cleaning campaign of the entire village, we have to teach them, above all, the inestimable benefits of co-operation. The village is for all and therefore if trench latrines have to be made to improve the sanitary condition of the place, all must join hands, if pits have to be filled up and roads or paths made, it must be done by concerted labour, if there is to be a school, all children must go to it, if any cottage industry is to be revived, its produce must be for the whole village. They must feed and clothe themselves first and the surplus only may go to neighbours. If the Panchayat system is to be revived, as I feel it should, the members must be elected by the women, no less than by the men. The villagers must be made to feel proud of their village. Occasional competitions may be held between villages so that an impetus may be given to them to co-operate with our workers in making their surroundings and themselves prizeworthy. Co-operative labour for the common weal must be our motto so that our villages may learn to stand on their own legs and wasteful expenditure on litigation may cease. I am quite sure that if the lesson of co-operation were learnt and practised in our villages which will be the basic units

of administration in our country that all the disunity which today exists among our towns folk would, *ipso facto*, disappear. Our workers must keep their own houses and the area round them spotlessly clean, they must eat bread made from hand-ground or bullock-ground wheat, hand-pounded rice, vegetables and fruit such as can be grown in the village, they must not be above putting their hands to some manual work during the course of the day, they must, in short, practise what they preach and there is no one so steeped in ignorance as will not, after some time, begin to emulate their good example. The problems of a clean water supply, of sanitation and hygiene, of illness and disease, of illiteracy and ignorance, of untouchability, of child marriage, of widow re-marriage, all exist in villages as well as in towns. There will, in some places, be the evils of drink, gambling and smoking also to be tackled. And everywhere, apart from the reforms already alluded to, there is the question of the revival of such handicrafts as will occupy the leisure hours of the villagers and bring them some economic relief. Spinning and weaving have vindicated their right to be fostered. Workers will revive those particularly native to any area. Then there is the most crying need of educating the children. Basic education whatever the craft employed, must be resorted to. Here too those young women who are burning with an urge to serve should get into touch forthwith with Shrimati Asha Devi and get a training in basic education. Students can devote some of their leisure hours to serving neighbouring villages during term and they could give more time during their vacations. I have said that married couples will probably be able to serve best. But there is no reason why a brother and sister or two sisters or two friends should not do equally well. It is difficult for lone young women to go and settle in a village. Apart from risk there is lack of intellectual companionship, which does, after a time, have a depressing effect. The work to be done too is so vast, that even two persons will be hard put to cope with it. But inasmuch as all life is adventure and it is the adventurous always who make history, we must hope for courage

from those in whose hands lies the power to make or mar the future of this great land.*

III PROFESSIONS AND PUBLIC LIFE

I have said elsewhere that every girl should be brought up to a profession. Whether she has need to earn her own livelihood or not is immaterial. Basically it is right that every human being should have the opportunity of developing to his or her full stature in whatever sphere the individual bent may lie. "Learning by doing" is the educationists' motto today. "Living by doing" should be every person's motto and each one of us should be fitted for that "doing". It is an empty life that contributes nothing to its environment by "doing". The need for doctors, nurses, midwives, teachers, artists and experts in handiworks is very great. If all the girl students in India today went in for these professions it would be a mere drop in the ocean of our want. The appeal for implementing this vital lack must needs, therefore, take first place, for

*Since writing the above the Conference has started the Save the Children's Fund and homes for orphans in Bengal and other famine areas. It is good to know that the children are to be educated on basic lines and it is to be hoped that from among these we may get physically strong and healthy-minded young men and women who will give back a hundred-fold to the villages what they have been fortunate enough to receive in education and general training. The Kasturba Memorial Fund has also come into being. Its aims and objects have definitely been made known by Gandhiji and they offer a wide sphere of service for women in villages. It is a tragedy that we women are not in a position to become sole trustees for a fund which is to raise the status, moral, intellectual and economic, of our sisters. I do not mean trustees in the narrow sense of holding the funds but trustees in the true sense of fulfilling the trust bequeathed to us by God of devoting our whole energies in serving the villages. If the All India Women's Conference had been able to undertake the work I know Gandhiji would have handed it over to us. But we have not justified our existence yet as an organization that has its roots deep in Indian soil. We must turn our thoughts to widening the scope of our activities so as to be an organization really representative of and working for the mass of Indian women.

health and education are the *sine qua non* of the wellbeing of a nation. There cannot be any unhealthy rivalry between men and women in the matter of such professions at the moment. Nor, in my opinion, need there ever be such problems in this regard as the countries of the Western hemisphere have had to face and will have to face in increasing measure when the war is over and the spectre of unemployment once again raises its head, provided we plan wisely and refuse to become the slaves of large scale machinery.

There are other professions such as journalism, dairy and poultry farming, agriculture, gardening and architecture in which I should like to see women playing their part. But as, at the moment, I feel the social services need them more than anything else I would like them to give their all to health and education. There is plenty of scope for service for women in municipalities and local boards. They could bring into these bodies a sense of civic responsibility and duty which is sadly lacking there. I know that where women have served on local bodies they have kept themselves above communal strife and personal rivalries and I would like to see more and more of them come forward for such work. At the moment I feel they can be of more practical use here than in our assemblies. But they must take their share in public life. They have acquitted themselves well in the political struggle for freedom. The names of many of them will be honoured when the full history of the courage and sacrifice of the Indian National Congress is written without prejudice in letters of gold. It is women who will perhaps be able to rise above party and communal strife for the common weal and raise the standard of politics. Why should politics be a dirty game? I know how often it is said that Gandhiji has mixed up ethics and politics and hence his failure in the realm of politics. When an impartial judgment can be formed of him I am sure it will be recognized that one of the greatest of the many great contributions he has made to humanity is his insistence on Truth in politics. He alone has kept his lamp burning brightly in a world

steeped in darkness because of his undying faith in the spiritual values of life. I hope Indian women at any rate will be true to him. For it is he who has raised our stature by showing us a way of life in which women can play even a nobler part than man if she becomes conscious of her innate strength. It is often said against us—and I think there is a large element of truth in this accusation for the average run—that we do not study deeply enough. If we are to take a creditable share in public life, we must be keen students of and intimately acquainted with the burning problems of the day. Facts and figures must be at our finger tips and ways and means of redress of any grievances and inequalities or of reform must be carefully thought out so that we may not be worsted in argument.

I personally would like to see a State Social Service under a Free India in which women can take their full share. It is a tragedy that we have no social service training centres even now. Camps are good exercise and may serve as refresher courses but we need proper schools where the right training may be imparted.

I have mentioned dairy and poultry farming, agriculture, gardening, architecture among subjects for women to study. The care of the cow should really come instinctively to us by tradition almost, as it were. Is her wellbeing not a symbol of health and happiness for us and our children? Then, if we are to serve the villagers, why should we leave knowledge of agriculture to men only? Growing of fruit and vegetables, so necessary for our proper diet, must be our special care. Ours is a land of hovels at the moment. One of the first things a national Government must do will be to provide proper living accommodation for every family. Women architects will have ample opportunity and scope for planning cottages suited to our requirements, bringing all the knowledge of housecraft and artistry into the building of our houses. In short, there is no sphere of national life where we cannot contribute provided we have the will to serve and are industrious enough to acquire the requisite knowledge.

IV

THE STATES

Coming as I do from a State, having opened my eyes in a palace, and having spent the early years of my childhood in all the pomp and paraphernalia of princely India, I cannot but be deeply interested in their welfare. It is a tragedy too deep for tears that our ruling Princes have not come up to standard and that what is called Indian India is no better off and in many instances much worse off than British India. There has been too much stress on the non-essentials of pomp and ceremony and a poor imitation of the system of government in vogue in British India. The Princes have not had the training or education necessary to fit them to rule and hence the natural feeling in the minds of national India that there is no room for them in the future polity of our Republic. I say Republic, advisedly, for I am sure India will evolve a socialized State when she has won her freedom. But since this is a book only for women I am here concerned only with what my sisters in States can do. All that has been said in the preceding pages about service in towns and villages is equally applicable to the States. I do think, however, that Indian Princesses can and should take the lead in social service in their domains. Just as we educated well-to-do women are out of touch with the vast majority of our women, so are they out of touch with their poor subjects. This gulf must be bridged. A much more simple form of life, less luxury, less extravagance on what are non-essentials should be adopted, a good example in the matter of education on right lines of their daughters must be set, a refusal to give their girls in marriage to Princes who are already married should come natural to those who are often relegated to a back seat themselves, rebellion against the dreadful custom of pardah should be resorted to. No social reform in a State can be of any value if the rulers themselves do not conform to standards essential for

civilized society. I know how helpless Indian Princesses are against the tyranny of age-worn and evil customs and my heart has bled for many a one. But on the analogy that God helps those who help themselves it is time that they ceased to suffer in silence. They have many sympathizers who would at any rate, harness public opinion against the wrong doer. It should not, in any event, be beyond the reach of Indian Princesses to bring light and life to their women subjects. They could draw up and carry out plans for housing, for proper water supply, for sanitation, for prevention of disease, for medical relief, for equal wages for women, for maternity and child welfare clinics, for basic education, for creches, for nursery schools, for schools for cottage industries, for the removal of untouchability, for rural uplift and all other social reform. They would not or should not meet with the opposition which we have to come up against in British India owing to official prejudice. I know how much has been done in certain States in the matter of housing, rural uplift and even for the removal of untouchability and the development of handicrafts. But it is a drop in the ocean. The gulf between the rulers and the ruled is too wide. It is up to the Princesses to try to bridge it. If they took the lead they would find many women in the States to work with them. That only socialized States will be able to exist in the future is a lesson that our Princes would be well advised to learn from now. How marvellous it would be for them if by reason of their service to their subjects they could unanimously be elected to remain at the heads of their State governments !

V

INTERNATIONALISM

It is but natural while we are struggling for our own freedom that the manifold problems of our own country should absorb all our energy and thought. But we cannot afford not to look beyond our borders. The world has been narrowed down by means of scientific discoveries which have willynilly drawn us nearer to each other. Two successive world wars have also shown that the actions of one nation have repercussions far beyond its neighbours. Moreover humanity is one inspite of its varying nationalities and if there is to be peace we must strive to bring into being a world where there shall be good will. The colour bar, the mad lust for domination can only disappear if human values are appraised higher than material gain. There is something radically wrong with the entire structure of human relationship that makes man delight in killing man whether it be in the name of civilization or religion or anything else. Two wrongs do not make a right, hatred must beget hatred and what is brought into being by violence can and will always be destroyed by greater violence. It is this fundamental truth that women have got to bring home to the people in their respective countries. No peace treaties can avail that have revenge as their basis and a self-righteous arrogance and hypocrisy in the so-called victors. Women are the natural preservers of life. Life grows from within them. They could make their influence felt if they would be big enough to rise above the walls of narrow nationalism that confine us today. Just as communism calls to the workers of the world to unite, let us women of the world unite and stake our all for a life worth living. Love conquers all things. We have it in us to give if we could only realize our moral strength and non-co-operate with violence in whatsoever form it raises its head.

VI

CONCLUSION

I do not suppose that I have said anything new for any one of my co-workers but inasmuch as few of us are giving ourselves as whole-heartedly to service as we should, I hope my words may have some effect and give some help to those who have felt frustrated or who do not know where and how to commence. Above all I trust my appeal to the young to gird themselves for service will not go in vain. I know that placed as we are under a foreign rule which has sapped our mentality and done inestimable harm to us if not ruined us morally, materially and culturally, we can do little until we are free from the chains of slavery. But freedom will come to us as surely as the darkness of the darkest night vanishes at dawn and it is for preparing ourselves for that great day that I appeal for giving and more giving of ourselves. The future can only be ours if we work for it here and now without a moment's delay. The past has its lessons for us, the future its hopes, but the hopes can never fructify if we let slip the shining hours of the present. When the great day dawns and our own government looks for servants ready to go forth at its bidding to banish all that is bad and usher in all that will conduce to the greatest good of the greatest number, let it not be said of us, women, that when we should have been working hard to uproot the weeds that were choking our growth we stood by idle. Ours is a rich inheritance. Let us prove ourselves worthy of it.

MANORVILLE
Simla W. 1943
Revised 1945

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